

Census of the nilgiri tahr in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu¹

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(With a plate)*

INTRODUCTION

The census was taken during the middle of May 1975, before the onset of the S.W. monsoon, in near ideal conditions. The weather was warm without being hot and intermittent thunder showers had dispelled the mist which normally blanket the tahr country obstructing visibility. The exception, however, was the Mukerti belt which because of its location at the junction of the two arms of the cliff line became mist bound by midday. A carpet of young grass covered the rolling 'downs' beyond Bhavanipuzha after a recent fire had run through the country burning off the coarse grass.

This served as an invitation to the tahr to come out of their hideouts among the cliffs on to the plateau proper, thus accounting for the gathering of the tahr herds at Nadgani. The wind which is an important factor in the case of a sensitive nosed animal like the tahr was true and steady and not fickle. The horsefly season in the tahr country which could be a nuisance to man and beast driving away tahr to the shelter of sholas was, fortunately, delayed and was only just commencing when the count concluded.

METHODS

The sight count method which is best suited for taking census of animals like the tahr which

have a proclivity for open country was employed. Powerful binoculars and a telescope were used for taking the count. Registered Shikaris Susai and Bokkan who have experience of similar operations in the Nilgiris and elsewhere assisted. The ideal method would have been to have divided the country into four or five sections and to have conducted the count over the entire region simultaneously. However, for want of trained personnel this could not be done.

The Country was divided into four sections and every morning the enumerators fanned out into the section in which they were operating, each covering roughly a third of the section taking the count as they moved from one hill top to the next along the cliff line. Care was taken to ensure that there was no duplication and that no part of the section was left out. Each block was double checked, the enumerators changing places. At Nadgani which held a large population of tahr, this process was repeated a third time, keeping track of the main herds all the while. Particular attention had to be paid to this process as the strength and composition of the herds kept altering from day to day and in some instances from hour to hour.

¹ Accepted July 1975.

CENSUS OF THE NILGIRI TAHR

THE OPERATION

The census operation was conducted over a ten day period between 7-v-75 and 19-v-75, and divided into three parts, with brief refitment breaks in between. The four sections into which the tahr country was divided were:

1. Mukerti—comprising Nilgiri Peak—Terrace—Mukerti Peak, Chinna Mukerti and Be Betta (7th May to 10th May 1975).
2. Western catchment—comprising King Dhar, western catchment dams 1, 2 and 3, Igandi and Chatti Burrai (12th and 13th May 75).

3. Nadgani—comprising the entire area—South of Bhavanipuzha including Nadgani, Sausage Hill, Ankin Malai, Varatuparai and the ridges beyond Varatuparai and Simon Hut (15th May to 18th May 1975).
4. Bangi tappal—comprising Billithada waterfall, Kinakorai, Bangitappal ridge, Cruz (Crucifix Hill) and Chembar (18th and 19th May 1975).

It may be mentioned that many of these place names cannot be traced on any map, but are names handed down by generations of shikaris.

THE COUNT:

Section 1—MUKERTI

Classification

Locality	S.B.	B.B.	L.B.M. & A.F.	Yearling	Young	Total
Nilgiris Peak Terrace		Nil				Nil
Mukerti Slopes	1	1	7	3	4	16
Chinna Mukerti	—	1	5	3	1	10
Chinna Lower slopes	—	1	8	3	4	16
Be Betta	1	—	—	—	—	1
	—	—	2	—	—	2
	2	3	22	9	9	45

(An all male group of 4 saddlebacks were seen a week after the count and out of which one was shot).

Section 2—WESTERN CATCHMENT

Locality	S.B.	B.B.	L.B.M. & A.F.	Yearling	Young	Total
King Dhar	1	2	15	3	5	26
Between W.C. Dams 1 and 2	—	1	2	2	1	6
Igandi	1	1	7	1	—	10
	2	4	24	6	6	42

Section 3—NADGANI

Locality	S.B.	B.B.	L.B.M. & A.F.	Yearling	Young	Total
Nadgani	1	3	43	6	9	62
„	—	2	25	2	4	33
„	—	1	5	—	—	6

When first seen the herd consisted of 101 animals, which later split and the composition kept changing.

Varatuparai	1	—	—	—	—	1
"	3	—	—	—	—	3
"	1	—	1	—	—	2
"	—	2	14	5	7	28
"	—	2	11	4	3	20
"	—	—	2	—	2	4
Ridge beyond Varatuparai	1	1	5	2	2	11
Sausage hill	—	—	1	1	—	2
Nadgani cliffs	—	2	8	1	2	13
Simon hut	1	2	15	2	2	22
	8	15	130	23	31	207

Section 4—BANGITAPPAL

Locality	S.B.	B.B.	L.B.M. & A.F.	Yearling	Young	Total
Billithadahalla waterfall	3	2	13	2	2	22
Cruz hill	—	—	4	—	2	6
Bangi ridge	—	—	4	4	2	6
Bangi slope	—	1	5	—	—	6
	3	3	26	2	6	40
Grand total	15	25	202	40	52	334

Classification:

The abbreviations denote

S.B.—Saddleback

B.B.—Dark brown male or Brown back

L.B.M.—Light brown male

A.F.—Adult female

Yearling—Slightly less than 1 year to about 2 yrs.

Young—Upto 9 months

The total number seen was 334. To make doubly sure that there was no duplication, two small herds of 15 and 11 seen in the proximity of the large herd of 101 after its break up was not included in the count. In spite of favourable conditions, it is not improbable that a hundred or more tahr remained out of sight and unenumerated. The total population could therefore be estimated at around 450.

On the classification, it may be noted that although it was possible to place individual tahr in small herds and groups in their proper class, such degree of accuracy was not possible where large herds were concerned. In the classification itself some overlapping could not be avoided. No attempt was made to classify L.B.M. and A.F. separately as this would have

slowed down the work considerably. But from samplings it was noted that the ratio between males and females in this class was roughly 1:3. Two male groups, both association between saddlebacks were seen. The majority of young were three to four months old, indicating a peak birth period during winter. There were another lot of kids eight to nine months old indicating a second peak in August-September. A few young of different ages from two months upwards were also seen.

COMPOSITION

Young accounted for 16 per cent of the population (rising to 20 per cent or more at times) thus indicating a healthy growth rate.



A yearling tahr
(Photo: Author)

But the percentage of yearling at 12 per cent, showed a decline in the rate of survival. This problem is discussed under predation.

1963 and 1975 census, a comparative study:

In 1963, 292 tahr were counted and the total population was estimated at 400 (*JBNHS 60(1):251*) compared to 334 and 450 for the present census—an improvement, but not a significant improvement in status. However, with the present 16 per cent growth rate the position may be expected to improve, unless conditions change. This problem is discussed elsewhere.

In 1969, George B. Schaller (*JBNHS 67(3): 365-389*) conducted a survey of the Mukerti and Bangitappal areas and reported that there was no improvement over the 1963 position.

	1963 census	1969 survey	1975 census
Mukerti	79	63	45
Western			
Catchment	66		42
Chembar	35		—
Bangi-			
tappal	47	113	40
Nadgani	65		207
	292		334

The distribution in 1963 as compared to 1975 was more even. Some of the notable areas where no tahr were sighted were Nilgiri Peak and Terrace; Chembar and Bison Swamp. Tahr population in Mukerti, King Dhar and Western Catchment Dams has declined. A sharp increase in the Nadgani population was observed. Although tahr can and do migrate from the Nilgiri Peak and Mukerti of the north-western limit of the tahr habitat to the Sispara end, in the south-west in actual fact tahr in Nilgiri Peak—Mukerti—Western catchment dam area tend to migrate locally in that stretch rather than cross over to the Bangitappal-Nad-

gani area. The same applies to the tahr in the south-western belt.

Opportunity was taken to check the Glenmorgan cliffs on the north-eastern edge of the plateau for tahr. None was found.

Sambar: Sambar have increased significantly, particularly in the Mukerti, Bangitappal, Simon Hut, Kinkorai and Nadgani areas.

FACTORS INHIBITING GROWTH

Habitat disturbance:

Since 1963 many new roads have been formed and wattle plantations have sprung up every where. Between Nilgiri Peak and Bangitappal, with the exception of Chinna Mukerti, wattle has been planted right up to the cliff line. Although the growth is poor and scraggy, because of these plantations grass had remained unburnt and consequently coarse and unpalatable to tahr—perhaps affecting the growth rate of the tahr. Had a belt of grassland been reserved as tahr grazing grounds, as requested by the Nilgiri Wild Life Association and as agreed to by the Forest Department, the position would have been different.

Large herds of cattle penned in the Tirupanthorai Hundi (near Western Catchment Dam No. 2) were being grazed on the hills adjoining the cliffs. The cattle and the graziers were up on the cliff line from about 8 a.m. until dusk. It is believed that this is an annual summer exodus. Thanks to cattle grazing and “accidental” (!) fires the grass on the surrounding hills had burnt down, promising good grazing for the tahr once the Hundi is vacated.

PREDATION

A large male black panther was seen on four occasions. Its habits and behaviour showed that it had become an expert tahr hunter concentrating on young and yearling strays. A female panther and its cubs were heard in a

shola near Nadgani. An examination of their fresh droppings showed that they had been feeding on a young tahr. Ten of the dozen panther droppings analysed contained hair and other remains of young and yearling tahr.

A pack of 8 wild dogs (dhole) were seen operating in the Mukerti area and a pack of 19 dhole was reported to be hunting in the upper Bhavani area. Evidence showed that the wild dogs were preying on sambar. The presence of dhole at two different places on the plateau at this time of the year seemed unusual as dhole migration to the plateau normally takes place in August-September.

Fresh tracks of two different tigers were seen. Two or three more were reported to be operating in the area. Of the eight tiger droppings examined only one contained the remains of tahr.

POACHING

Wherever human habitations abutted tahr grounds tahr suffered from a certain amount of poaching, as in the Nilgiri Peak area (from Terrace), Western Catchment Dams 2 & 3 (from Emerald Valley). At Kinakorai and Nadgani well set up poaching camps were found. These well stocked areas seemed to attract poachers from villages far and near. And also from Kerala via the Sispera pass.

It is a notable fact that practically in every instance the poaching cases that were detected or attempts at poaching that were aborted were at the instance of game licence holders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Concentration of the tahr in any one area is bad. To encourage more even distribution, grasslands along the cliff line must be burnt annually. For this purpose some of the poor wattle plantations in the Nilgiri Peak, Mukerti,

King Dhar, Western Catchment and Bangitapal areas may have to be sacrificed. Seeing how scraggy and unhealthy these plantations are, the sacrifice in terms of forest 'wealth' may be negligible.

2. The country beyond Bhavanipuzha, which is in any event, unsuitable for planting should be left undeveloped as a tahr wilderness.

3. Poaching in the areas mentioned must be eliminated. Periodical visits and patrols must be organised. As Silent Valley in Kerala opens up and of which there are already indications, the tahr habitat will become a sensitive area.

4. Tigers are reported to be taking regular toll of cattle in the Emerald and Avalanche Valleys, Korakundah and elsewhere on the western side of the plateau. And leopards around Thiashola and Korakundah.

As cattle cannot be eliminated from these areas the scheme for paying compensation to owners of cattle killed by leopards and tigers must be extended to the plateau if the carnivore there are to be saved, and they in turn are to keep the tahr population in balance.

5. Since Nilgiri Tahr will be covered by the special game licence, under the New Wild Life (Protection) Act, of 1972 a ceiling on the total number of saddle backs that may be bagged in a year could be placed to prevent over shooting. This may be fixed at four annually or two every half year, with no provision for carry over. Being a renewable "crop" this is a conservative figure for culling. A half yearly limit is suggested for more even spacing of the shooting and encourage visits to the tahr country throughout the year.

TAHR SANCTUARY

It is believed that the formation of a tahr sanctuary in the Nilgiris is under consideration. A few thoughts on the subject may not be out of place in this report.